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ABSTRACT

Two papers concerning secondary school language training are presented. "Foreign Language Training: Bridging the Gap between High School and College," by Michele R. Morris, outlines some of the problems of high school-college second language articulation from the point of view of a college teacher. Student placement in college foreign language courses is pinpointed as a primary problem area, and statistics from one university's placement process are presented to illustrate screening inadequacies. The problems most often encountered in placement tests and in subsequent meetings with students in class are found to be in aural comprehension, syntax, morphology, and pronunciation. It is recommended that college teachers be somewhat less ambitious and allow the students to learn thoroughly and accurately at first, increasing content later and including more authentic documents. "Cultural Stereotypes: A Schizophrenic Vision of Modern France. A Survey of High School Teachers of French," by Pierre Verdaguer, reports the results of a survey of secondary school teachers in the Washington, District of Columbia area concerning the extent, the forms, and the reasons for stereotypical misconceptions about modern French culture. (MSE)

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LANGUAGE TRAINING AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL: LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL FOUNDATION

A Two-Part Paper Given at the AATF / ACTFL Joint Meeting in Chicago, November 17, 1984

by

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and

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRAINING: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE.

Many years of teaching French language courses at Georgetown University have revealed to me, and to many colleagues as well, an apparent disparity between secondary and college levels regarding achievements, and perhaps expectations. The purpose of this paper is to define particular problem areas and to suggest ways in which high school teachers might help their students bridge this apparent gap.

The placement tests which my colleagues or I have designed and administered to entering students in the last several years have yielded results which must, at times, have been very disappointing to students, and to their teachers as well: many freshmen with 2, 3, or even 4 years of high school French are

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placed in Introductory or Intermediate French classes here, though a number of others have reached a high enough level to undertake a composition or literature course (1).

The chart reproduced in Appendix I does not report strictly scientific statistics (some students did not record the amount of previous language instruction, for instance, and the figures for 1982 and 1983 were based on Test A, those for 1984 on Test B.) Nevertheless, the chart indicates a rather striking pattern: more than half the students with 3 years of high school French were placed in Intermediate French, as well as an even greater percentage of those with 4 years of secondary school French. The old rule-of-thumb, one year of H.S. language is equivalent to one semester of college instruction, does not seem to hold true. Indeed, when one third of those with more than 4 years of previous instruction are still placed at the Intermediate level, one can justifiably be concerned.

Of course, not every aspect of language proficiency is revealed by placement tests. The 1982 and 1983 placement tests were supplemented by short student written compositions. Again, these show basic problems in syntax and morphology which correspond to the mistakes found in the written tests and often cause meaning to be obscured (see Appendix II.)

In our rapid screening at the beginning of the semester, we are not able to test oral/aural skills. Yet once classes start we encounter serious problems in these areas: for example, aural comprehension and pronunciation are so faulty that they

prevent acquired knowledge from being manifested and effectively used. Indeed, these areas are often the weakest aspects of proficiency. As a result, some students (as many as 25%), must change their registration, often moving to an inferior level.

These facts made us wonder, first of all, whether our expectations were too high, our standards unrealistic. A careful examination of several forms of standardized tests given to American high school students, such as ACH and AP tests, showed great similarities in level of difficulty, though the format and type of questions were somewhat different. For instance, the ACH tests include more reading comprehension and more global vocabulary items, while our tests are based to a greater extent on discrete-point vocabulary items and (at least in Test A) include a larger proportion of grammar items.

To take some specific examples, ACH test Form M-XAC includes 35 grammar items, 25 reading comprehension items, and 30 vocabulary items. AP test Form 3FBP 48, Part I includes 40 items of oral comprehension, 20 grammar items and 40 questions on reading comprehension, while Part II of the same test, which represents 50% of the total, includes 20 sentence completion and other grammar items, plus a free composition. Our own Test A is composed of 60 multiple-choice items, 42 of which are cloze-type grammar questions, and the rest substitutions and translations. Our Test B includes more items, 145 in all, 56 blind multiple-choice grammar items (cloze-type), 44 multiple-choice vocabulary in context items, and 44 blind multiple-choice lexicon items.

The larger number of vocabulary items may explain the

somewhat higher placements in 1984, when fewer students with 4 or more years of previous language instruction were placed in Introductory, and even in Intermediate classes. However, several colleagues indicated that our norms for this new test may have been too low, and a number of students ended up in classes that were less advanced than those in which they were originally placed. Exact figures representing these changes are not available, but our norms will be raised a little next year to compensate for this.

A striking correlation does exist, however, between results on the ACH and AP tests and our own placement tests, particularly if the former were taken during the last year of secondary school. Partial statistics, which were kept for several years, have suggested that placements could be made on the basis of such scores. For the past 4 years, I have recommended placement according to ACH scores as follows: under 400 = Introductory I, 410-500 = Introductory II, 510-600 = Intermediate I, 610-700 = Advanced I, 710-800 = Composition and/or Literature. Few students therefore have taken our own placement tests if pre-placed in this manner. Those who did, often hoping to enter at a higher level, often confirmed the original determination, though a few did indeed improve their placement by one level. We have therefore concluded that our tests yield results which are very comparable to those obtained in the national tests.

Let us now turn to the kind of problems that are most often encountered in placement tests and in subsequent meetings with students in class. I have identified the following: aural

comprehension, basic grammar errors, inaccuracy, and pronunciation.

Aural comprehension difficulties are particularly common at the first two levels, and account for a number of registration changes. Students who have learned and retained quite a bit of vocabulary and basic grammar, and therefore achieve placement in Intermediate level classes through testing, seem unable to understand such simple questions as: "Quel temps fait-il?" or "D'où êtes-vous?" Typically, they will answer: "Sept heures."or "Je suis à la classe." Another frequent type of mistake is the failure to recognize a past tense in the question, so that the answer is given in the present.

Basic grammar errors show up in written test answers as well as in composition (see Appendix II). They can be grouped in the following categories:

-- genders: words such as fromage, ville, problème, période, région, visite, mer, note, etc., are consistently assigned wrong gender marks, and many other mistakes consequently occur (agreement of adjectives, pronouns, even verbs.)

-- verbs: basic forms are not known, or not remembered, even phonetically, for common verbs like venir, voir, pouvoir, etc. Verb endings are often misspelled. Reflexive verbs are not mastered (j'ennuie, instead of je m'ennuie.) Elementary mastery of tense and mood usage is lacking. Distinction between present, past, and future, is not well established.

-- vocabulary: knowledge appears very spotty, and communication is therefore hindered (see Sample 3.) False cognates are

the source of many mistakes (e.g.,reste instead of repos.) On the other hand, students often fail to recognize true cognates, and their vocabulary is that much poorer. Simple conjunctions or other such necessary parts of speech are often not known (pourquoi instead of parce que), making it difficult to express complex ideas.

-- prepositions: even the most common are often improperly mastered (en instead of à la maison, dans les Etats-Unis, instead of aux..., en chez moi instead of chez moi, contente avec, instead of contente de, etc.)

-- word order: especially placement of some common adverbs, such as aussi, word order in negative and interrogative forms, place of object pronouns, etc.

-- spelling: though this is admittedly a skill which connotes a more advanced level of writing ability, we find that faulty spelling is a real hindrance to accurate learning and memorization.

This brings us to the next area of concern: accuracy. It often seems that students remember learned material and patterns only in a very vague, global way. The same word will be given two different gender marks within the same paragraph. A verb will be used correctly once and incorrectly a few lines further. Morphological and syntactic errors abound (e.g., les plus scènes d'activité.)

Lastly, pronunciation is often so faulty as to be a real obstacle to communication. Je is not Jean, jeune is not jaune, le musée du Jeu de Paume is not the same as le musée du jus de pom-

me, l'amour is not la mort, le coeur is not le corps or le cours.

Fluency in oral expression is not one of our concerns at this point. If a student has really learned to understand authentic spoken French, has mastered some vocabulary and syntax, and has learned to pronounce words correctly, fluency will eventually follow. It is the last of the skills to be acquired for most.

What can we suggest in order to remedy the very regrettable situation that we are too often faced with, i.e., to "put back" in introductory level courses a student who has already spent several years working on a language?

My first overall recommendation may appear paradoxical: be less ambitious. I fear that many teachers feel compelled to finish a given syllabus, to go through a given textbook, to cover a given corpus. We ourselves in the colleges fall prey to the same temptation. We must all realize that, at the first and second year levels especially, it is crucial for the students to learn what they learn thoroughly and accurately. Long lists of words, forms and use of too many verbs and too many tenses, can only lead to confusion and inaccuracy. Strive for mastery, repeat and go back often so that each skill is not forgotten as soon as the next step is reached.

As language instruction progresses in the secondary curriculum, more cultural and even literary material is introduced, and many teachers breathe a sigh of relief, as they finally reach what they believe is their goal: bringing new cultural awareness to young minds. Indeed, that is an important concomitant of

language learning. But this must not make us forget to keep working on and refining the basic language skills. Too many students come to college, fresh from an AP class (5th year), and exhibit serious ignorance of grammar, as though reading Molière, Baudelaire, and Marguerite Duras had made them forget the forms of prendre or venir.

The emphasis on the development of oral skills was a welcome change a generation ago. But we must take special care to ensure that all skills be developed equally, as they tend to reinforce one another. Otherwise we find ourselves in front of students who have attained, say, an Intermediate Low level in some areas of proficiency, but are still in the Novice Mid, or Novice High range for the others (these terms correspond to the ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines.) Much frustration is then experienced by students and teachers alike.

At the risk of being branded an old-fashioned drillmaster, I would advocate a constant stress on accuracy. It is not enough to learn the words needed to name things or to describe an action, the proper verb form must be used, the correct gender must be assigned to the noun. Nothing is easier to acquire, and harder to loose, than bad habits.

Finally, when introducing supplementary materials, we should all try to use authentic documents: audio and video tapes, films, magazines, etc. Teachers are often overwhelmed with catalogues and lists of "cultural material" but in general, it is advisable to stay with authentic documents available directly from France, Canada, or any other Francophone country. The

French Review, for instance, is a good source of reference for such material.

I am keenly aware of the limitations and constraints under which my colleagues at the secondary level labor. I know time is short, motivation often tepid, students are too often engaged in too many activities, and pressures are great when college application time comes. Similar pressures and constraints exist at the college level. We ourselves are looking critically at our goals and expectations. Let us make the most of the time we have, so that we can achieve what is certainly a common aim: to help our students reach the highest possible level of language proficiency.

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(1) Our language courses at Georgetown are called Introductory I and II (first two semesters), then Intermediate I and II (third and fourth semesters), and Advanced I and II (fifth and sixth semesters). These are non-intensive courses. Most language majors take more intensive courses, which enable them to reach the next level, Composition and Style, in two, rather than three years. The figures given in this paper are all based on students entering the non-intensive language classes.

Students Placed In:		INTRODUCTORY(1st Year)		INTERMEDIATE(2nd Year)		ADVANCED(3rd Year)		COMPOSITION or LITERATURE (4th
Years of Previous Instruction		Intro.I	Intro.II	Inter.I	Inter.II	Adv.I	Adv.II	
2 YEARS	1982		75%		23%		2%	
	1983	30%	52% 22%	36%	47% 11%		0%	
	1984		23% 23%		56% 28% 28%	15%	15%	5%
3 YEARS	1982		44%		50%		2.5%	2.5%
	1983	13%	37% 24%	36%	52% 16%		10%	
	1984	2%	23% 21%	53%	66% 13%	6%	6%	5%
4 YEARS	1982		24%		60%		15%	
	1983	7%	22% 15%	36%	57% 21%		19%	1%
	1984		8% 8%	33%	68% 35%	13%	18% 5%	5%
More Than 4 YEARS	1982		8%		50%		35%	6%
	1983	1%	8% 7%	26%	37% 11%		50%	4%
	1984		0%	7%	27% 20%	25%	33% 8%	39%

APPENDIX I

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APPENDIX II

SAMPLE COMPOSITIONS.

Sample 1 (Student with 4 years of High School French, 1 week in French-speaking country.)

Ma Vacance.

Cette annee, j'ai vienes au Universite de Georgetown. J'ai visite, avec mes parents, les plus schenes d'activite. Apres le visite je revenais chez moi. Pendant cet huit-jours, j'ai travaille au bureau de Congressman Ham Fish. Ca cette une experience formidable! Le travaille ont etait tres interessant. Apres le travaille avait fini, j'ai fait un bon voyage au Bermuda. Les environs de Bermuda sont beaux et je fais beaucoup. Je revenais et preparait de partir a Georgetown. Ca cette une experience pas formidable mais je ne regrette pas ma decision. Georgetown est un nouveau experience et un bon experience.

Sample 2 (Student with 4 years of High School French, no travel abroad.)

Je chose L'Ecole de Foreign Service a Georgetown parce que je interesse dans l'etudie de tout le monde. Cette ecole est le meuilleur ecole dans ce region d'etudie dans les Etats-Unis.

Aussi, je aime bien Washington, D.C. Elle a tres grandes recources. Je veux venir la capital de des Etats-Unis.

Je visite Washington, D.C. dans 1976. Je vois le ville et j'ai decide que j'ai veux venir d'ecole ici. Je suis tres contente avec ce decision.

Sample 3 (Student with 3 years of High School French, no travel abroad.)

Les vacances d'ete sont un period de reste. Tout les monde aimer cet period pour quoi ils puisent faire tout les desirent. Tout les vacances j'aime travailler. Si j'ai beaucoup de temps j'ennuie. Mon frere aime ver le television tout les jour et mes soeurs adore manger. Ma mere travailler tres diligente dans les vacances pourqoui tout la famille est en la maison. Mon pere retourne a la maison depuis un jour mauvais et commence a guta a la famille. La maison est tres tranquille a cette heur et tout le monde est silent. Les vacances en chez moi sont un disaster. Je pense que l'ete est pour autre persons.

Pierre Verdaguer
University of Maryland

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES: A SCHEZOPHRENIC VISION OF MODERN FRANCE

A Survey of High School Teachers of French

Teaching contemporary French civilization at the college level implies the preliminary task of assessing the students' sterotypic visions of the target culture. Everyone recognizes the importance of identifying stereotypes and clichés. Once debunked, they can be used most profitably during the course, as Jean Carduner has shown in "L'Enseignement des stéréotypes culturels" (in Options nouvelles en didactique du français langue étrangère, Montréal: Didier, 1982). Modern civilization courses should thus have a primary function of correcting erroneous perceptions which prevail among students.

It is equally important, however, to determine to what extent language instructors themselves harbor inaccurate images of the target culture. Most students of French at the college level have had some exposure to the language in high school. They consequently acquire very early conceptions about French culture, insofar as the process of language learning is never devoid of cultural references. If stereotypic images are conveyed to the students -- consciously or not -- during these early formative

years, chances are that they will not only survive but become very difficult to eradicate later on. Cultural misconceptions are thus perpetuated from generation to generation.

In order to measure to what extent, in which areas, and if possible, why, stereotypic visions survive, I devised a questionnaire which was mailed to the high school and junior high school teachers of a county in the Washington D.C. area. Nearly half of them answered (17 out of 36). In view of the rather modest size of this token survey, the interpretation which follows can only be regarded as indicative. Additional surveys will have to be conducted to complement this one.

The multiple choice questionnaire was divided into two parts. First, 7 personal questions were aimed to determine the profile of the respondents. The information thus gathered showed that most of them were experienced or very experienced teachers (about 90% of them had taught for more than 5 years). Their university training was equally impressive, since three quarters of the respondents held a Master of Arts. Only a minority (about 20%) had spent a total of less than one month in France or a French-speaking country. For many (40%), cumulative stays amounted to more than 3 months. When asked how recent their last visit was, two thirds answered that it had taken place within the past 3 years. One fourth of the respondents, however, had not visited a French-speaking country in over 10 years. Most teachers

(95%) declared that they found it difficult to keep informed about the evolution of modern France. Although 40% of the respondents had had the opportunity to take civilization courses, only two teachers had done so recently (one in 1976 and one in 1983).

The second part of the questionnaire, 30 questions in all, was designed to assess the teachers' understanding of modern France. It should be noted that other francophone countries were not taken into accouent in the questionnaire; France, however, was repeatedly compared to other European countries and the United States. Some of the questions were designed to test the respondents' sense of proportions and dealt with the country's size, population, and economic standing in Europe and in the world. Other questions were more specifically intended to reveal stereotypic visions and misconceptions. Some keywords with strong stereotypic value (such as wine and perfume) were included to test the respondents' propensities towards clichés.

The questionnaire also aimed to evaluate the respondents' ability to differentiate between the French and American societies by focusing on fundamentally different attitudes and institutions (vacationing, the church, centralization and decentralization, etc.). Finally, since the questionnaire had been devised for teachers, a section dealt specifically with the educational system.

The questionnaire focused strictly on present day French society; there were no allusions to the country's history or literature. Furthermore, no emphasis was placed on details of

everyday life and so-called survival situations, as the latter usually do not constitute problem areas for most teachers. Good survival capabilities do not necessarily imply an accurate overall perception of the target culture: one may understand subtle points of etiquette, know what to order in a restaurant, be very much aware of what kind of behavior is deemed offensive, and still have little comprehension of the country's international role and status or have difficulty to explain a Frenchman's attitude towards Government, for example. One's global grasp of French society, in other words, may remain essentially superficial; and stereotypes thrive on superficiality.

A quick survey of the answers reveals the areas where respondents do best and worst. The educational system is, on the whole, well understood: most respondents (83%) associate a "Grande Ecole" with a selective graduate school, not a preparatory school, a college, or a community college. Fewer (77%), however, know that the "bac" is required to enter a university. France is correctly perceived to be a highly centralized nation by 77% of all respondents. Many, 65%, know that La Martinique is an overseas department, not a protectorate (25%). Sixty percent know that France is not a member of NATO and that the EEC dates back to the late 1950s. More than half assess accurately the country's population, although answers vary considerably (from 33 to 63 million). Almost half are correct in their assumption that in the French fiscal system children help reduce the tax

burden substantially. Finally, 47% understand that a "département" is an administrative division which cannot be compared to an American state, although an equivalent number associate it with a state.

There are also areas where respondents do not score very high. Only a very small minority (6%) knows that capital goods constitute the major source of exports for the country. Only 18% consider (accurately) that the proportion of practising Catholics is under 20%. Most respondents give the French Communist Party far too much power. And fewer than 20% know that it is much more difficult to be admitted into "classes préparatoires" than a university.

Interesting contradictions are thus revealed. Although "Grandes Ecoles" are equated with very selective graduate schools, 65% of the respondents believe that the university represents a more difficult track than the post-lycée "classes préparatoires", which prepare students for the highly competitive examinations one has to pass to gain admission into the prestigious "Grandes Ecoles." The system, in this respect, clearly remains very mysterious, probably because French universities are thought to play the same role as their American counterparts, which is not the case.

It is perhaps more surprising to see that France and Germany are often thought to have comparable populations (65%), indicating that France's relative demographic decline since the 18th century, which culminated in an actual drop in population in the inter-war

period, is largely unknown, useful as this may be to understand the post-war demographic and economic revival of the country.

Interestingly, the answers suggest that the respondents are torn between a pre-World War II vision of a mostly rural France and images of grandeur, which probably go back to the Napoleonic era and the Ancien Régime. This would explain why the country is sometimes seen as more powerful and more populated than West Germany, while at the same time being perceived as under-industrialized.

Such contradictions -- which are numerous -- show that the respondents can be very well informed, but that this knowledge is embedded in such a solid stereotypic foundation that a schizophrenic image prevails. It is not surprising, therefore, that the stereotype of a very rural France should be very strong: almost half of the respondents believe that more than 60% of the population lives in the country, and almost three fourths think that the proportion is 45% -- it is, in fact, around 25%. The prevailing image is that of a pre-World War II, or even 19th century, France. What is, however, in contradiction with this idea is that 53% of the respondents do know that roughly one person in five lives in the Paris area. It is even more telling that many of them (41%) should associate France with an essentially rural country where more than one fifth of the population is concentrated in the Paris area, which would leave very little indeed for other French urban areas. It is clear that the disproportionate demographic importance of the Paris area is not linked

in the respondents' minds to the post-war urban and industrial development of the country.

Consequently, a nation perceived as essentially rural is nonetheless thought to be more powerful than West Germany. Only 23% of the respondents know that, as an economic power, France ranks fifth in the world after the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R., Japan, and West Germany, but before Great Britain and Italy. Almost twice as many (41%) place France before Germany, as if the image of 18th century power still distorted today's economic reality. This would explain why the conventional American stereotypic vision, which places Great Britain well ahead of Germany and France, as a survey of L'Express (February 3, 1984) confirms, is not shared by teachers. Specialists of French seem to be very much attached to the rural stereotype (with its traditional connotation of "douceur de vivre") while overcompensating for it by investing France with exaggerated economic might. Another example of the same contradiction is reflected in the belief that France, rural as it may be, has a high ratio of motor vehicles per capita. How could a country which is still essentially rural, one may ask, have managed to acquire the trappings of industrialization or achieved greater economic status than its powerful neighbor?

Questions about agriculture also prompt stereotypic answers. Eighty three percent of all respondents choose wine as the country's major commodity. Answers clearly indicate that in France everything still revolves around viticulture (although

wine constitutes a mere 10% of the total agricultural output). This would explain why over one third of the respondents believe that the consumption of wine is on the increase -- just like in this country -- when in fact it has been decreasing steadily. As far as exports are concerned, wine is also everyone's favorite. Out of four options, 83% of the respondents choose 2 answers which list wine as the main export, and 65% of them opt for wine and perfume. At this point, the stereotypic image of France reaches its apex: its citizens reside in the country, and they produce wine, which they export and drink. Incidentally, the stereotype of a France dominated by rural activities is reinforced by the belief that the use of local dialects and languages is very widespread in the provinces, which is no longer the case.

Contradictions thus reveal the persistence of very strong stereotypes which tend to coexist with insightful understanding of French contemporary society, and which survive in spite of countervailing evidence. Stereotypes are insidious because they both fascinate and reassure. They provide an illusion of cultural stability. Even French specialists are not necessarily immune to their obfuscating value, which accounts for schizophrenic visions of the culture.